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THERE ARE STUPID QUESTIONS

File No. 9.020302 | 2019-01-15

Quick Summary: Ask appropriate and well-thought-out, relevant questions during the interview.

Abstract:

The common view of a job interview is that the candidate patiently sits by, responding to questions asked by the interviewer. That view is certainly appropriate and occurs in every case. However, the candidate should come equally prepared to ask relevant questions in return. The key for the candidate is to ask relevant questions. Questions asked that have already been answered shows an immediate lack of listening. Questions that should have been answered through basic pre-interview research show a lack of preparation. Your questions may reveal more about you than your answers.

We often hear a presenter encourage the audience to participate. The words of encouragement usually include “There are no stupid questions.” Although that statement is noble, the reality is that sometimes people do, in fact, ask stupid questions! If not stupid, many questions are inappropriate for time or place. Be sure you do not fall into that trap during the interview process. The easiest way to stumble is to ask questions that show you have not done your homework about the company. The lack of knowledge of even basic facts about the company can only be interpreted as you not taking the opportunity seriously, you are lazy, or you expect the interviewer to sell you on the position. It's almost as bad as asking stupid questions is to ask inappropriate questions. During the early interviewing stages, asking about benefits, time off, and similar employee-centric issues sends the message that the interview process is all about what you *want* and not what you *can do* for the company. Of course, personnel issues are important and need to be thoroughly understood but only at the right time. Inadvertently asking a “stupid” or inappropriate question is likely to offset all of the positive impressions that you have made and are likely to be remembered long after the interview is over.

Most companies and all industries have “TLAs” and “FLAs” that are part of their everyday lexicon. Many of these terms (“Three Letter Acronyms” and “Four Letter Acronyms”) may be inadvertently used during the interview process. It is not a stupid question to ask what they mean. It shows that you are, indeed, listening and trying to understand. However, there is an exception. If you are presenting yourself as an “SME” (Subject Matter Expert), you need to be familiar with industry jargon or your credibility will be questioned.

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" if you don't know; or ask for clarifications to statements made. Showing intense listening shows interest. When possible, state facts with your questions. For example, "I read on your website that... can you give me some background on why the company...?"

A common trap that most of us fall into regularly is to stop listening and to begin to think about how we will respond when given the chance or as we interrupt the other person before they have finished! During this response formulation time, missing another fact, figure, or comment the other person is making is easy. When you then ask the already answered question, it may be obvious to the other person that you were not listening or worse, are just plain stupid!

A technique that I often use with doctors and other specialists after they have explained something I am unfamiliar with is to say, "Let me tell you what you just told me to make sure that I understood you correctly." Invariably, they smile and patiently listen to my summary. Sometimes I get it right, sometimes not. No matter what, I learn, and the other party appreciates my sincere desire to "get it right." As often as I have used this technique, I have never had anyone balk or take offense to my request. To the contrary, it has brought us closer together. Isn't that what you want to achieve during an interview?